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ABSTRACT

After a brief story illustrating the essential humanness of the work of educators, a British educator addressing an American audience reviews fundamental ideas about the nature of children and offers suggestions about optimal classroom practices. The ideas about the nature of children which are presented concern the uniqueness of individuals and their experience; the importance of learning through words which are related to children's experience; children's feelings and emotions; and children's natural dispositions toward curiosity, exploration, learning, imagination, and fantasy. Cautionary remarks on current educational practices are offered in conclusion. Teachers are encouraged to assess the worth of their efforts by often asking themselves whether the time students spend with them in class was good enough to be part of someone's life. (RH)

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CHILDREN COME FIRST

John Coe's speech at the 1987 ACEI Study Conference. A transcript.

It is a pleasure to be here.

We have come to the end of what I am sure has been a very enjoyable and professionally worthwhile conference. Before we go our separate ways and return to our work with and for young children, I want to presume to remind us and they will only be reminders, of the heart of that work - the children themselves. Perhaps such reminders are needed these days in both our countries. We live and work in an increasingly technological age, a complex age, an age of an even more elaborate bureaucracy and administration and an age when our politicians are taking a greater and greater interest in education. Long may they do so, we need them to take an interest so that one day they will invest more in education and accord teachers the status which is their due. Above all this is an age in which we can see considerable progress in education. It is almost as if our work is expanding faster than we ever dreamed possible. If you, perhaps at times under pressure in your school system, in your classroom, in your school, like me in England sometimes lack a longer perspective it is important to pause for a moment to consider how far we have come.

Now you may feel that the histories of our two nations are somewhat different in length. But the histories of our attempts to create an educated community for all children - those histories are much the same length. We both started around 100-120 years ago. The date I have as a benchmark for me in England is 1870. I am reminded that in that year half the children in our cities did not go to school at all. And those who did, left at the age of ten with a thin modicum of reading and writing and perhaps a little figuring. This was not much more than a century ago. In that year 1870, when we really began, it was happening in America in a similar way. That is the history of our work. One quarter of all the people in Britain could not even sign their own names. If at times you read critical newspaper articles, hear statements made by politicians that are hostile to your schools, hear criticisms which allege falling standards - and we both do - just keep that longer perspective in your mind and remember how far we have come. How very far, in what is a relatively short time when seen against the sweep of history.

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The background to this conference, the background to your work and to my work, is one of success - for very, very many children. There is more to be done yet, of course, much more. Your very membership of ACEI, your attendance at this conference shows that you are concerned to do more yet. But the background to what we do is one of very great success.

So, in such a complex time of politics, of administration, of high technology and rapid developments in society itself, perhaps right at the end here on Sunday morning we might be allowed a reminder or two about the children who are at the heart of all we do. May I say that just occasionally I meet politicians and administrators in Britain who regard the children as slightly difficult and embarassing because it would be perfectly possible to run a very fine education system without them! It would be so neat, so exact, and things would happen as they are planned. But, of course, our work is with people and the humanness of people. Sometimes society itself forgets that, or ignores it. We know, because every day we are with those young people and their parents.

Let me begin my look at children this morning - my reminders of children. I have nothing new to say. Let me begin my reminders with one of the essential humanness of what we do as teachers. You may well know, especially those of you who have been to England, that we have religious education in our schools. And the true story I'm going to tell you, a religious story, will serve as my beginning.

It is a story of a celebration, of Christmas actually, a Nativity play performed by quite young children - say six-year-olds and seven-year-olds, the children we still call "infants". These children attended a rather smart primary school - an elementary school, very well supported in the city of Oxford where I used to work. The parents were very enthusiastic and full of praise for their school as are most parents of young children in both England and America. Every Christmas they put on a Nativity play, the story of the first Christmas and the auditorium would be packed with parents. And there would be an extremely prestigious front row with the Lord High Sheriff of Oxford sitting with the local dignatories and me at the end with the principal, the "headteacher" - as we call them. It would go well and everyone would walk out of the auditorium with a nice warm feeling about modern education.

Then there was a change of principal and the new principal, Marian, decided to do something different the next Christmas. She said, "You know these children are learning the lines by heart and they deliver them very well but it doesn't seem to be much of the children. So let's do something different. Let's take a risk. Let the children make up the words of the Nativity as they go along. They know the story. They can make up their own words."

It was moving the occasion and the school a little bit nearer the children, which makes for good education. Anyway, there we were on the night in question. They had done it in rehearsal. It had gone well. But as we sat on the front row with a crowded auditorium of parents ready to watch the Nativity, I noticed Marian's knuckles were a touch whiter than normal. She was taking risks. You can imagine - every one of you - what could have happened if one of the children had dried up, if it hadn't gone smoothly.

She was putting herself and her new work on the line. All went happily for a while - but of course we were watching young children and there was a hiccup. The nativity story reached the point where Joseph and his bepillowed Mary approached the door of the inn. Joseph, chosen for his high intelligence and quickness with words, knocked at the door, and it opened to reveal the largest infant of all, one of the seven-year-old boys - the innkeeper, legs astride, arms folded, completely blocking the way into the inn.

So far everything was fine. Joseph explained they'd come a long way and they were tired. They must have a room. Of course, the innkeeper refused quite firmly - absolutely no room at the inn! Joseph asked again, all according to plan - explaining about the tax gathering, how far they'd come and really, please, let us have a room. You can find us something.

And the innkeeper refused again. It was at this point that I noticed a light in the innkeeper's eye. He was enjoying his role. And no doubt, he had his mother and his father and perhaps his grandmother also, in the audience. And when you think about it, the innkeeper doesn't play a very large part in the story after they get into the stable!

Anyway, Joseph asked again, expecting, I think, this time to be shown to the stable. But, "No, oh no, absolutely nothing here. Go away, you can't come in! We've absolutely nothing".

Joseph cast a slightly desperate look over his shoulder at his principal, but she, to her enormous credit, just smiled encouragingly and didn't move. It would have been very easy to get up and just ease things along. Of course it would. But she trusted the children, which is what you do all the time and what I try to do.

Joseph returned to the attack. He explained again why they had to have room. He cued the response. He said, "Anywhere will do, anywhere, perhaps where the animals are!" And was refused again.

By now everyone in the auditorium had realized that things were not as they should be. But Joseph was an enterprising boy. He tried for the fifth time and produced a trump card. He said, "Look, we must have a room. We must! You see my wife here, Mary, she's pregnant!"

This word dropped like a stone in the auditorium. It was a word seldom heard there. The innkeeper was taken aback. This was something he had not expected. But he was equal to it. He took a step back and then said, "Pregnant, is she? Well, that's not my fault!"

But Joseph was not to be outdone because he said, "And it's not mine either!"

So at last they got into the stable and all was well. And again, the parents and the members of the school board and everyone else went home with a good warm feeling about the children and their school and their work. As for me I felt a little bit warmer than usual because risks had been taken. The children had been trusted more. And I can tell you this, as they went out the door, those children had felt, had really felt, the Nativity more deeply and more personally than ever before.

The story will serve as my first reminder of the essential humanness of our work - the humanness that is sometimes not acknowledged all that much by those who research and serve on commissions and publish and seek to make what is essentially a human activity into a system and a science.

Now, let's look at our children, your children in America and mine in Britain. The detail of what we do will often vary but the way our children grow and learn is the same. This is beyond a particular place or a particular time. So my reminders are concerned more with ideas about children than with the detail of our practice. You will share, I am sure, many of these ideas, and if and when you work them out in practice, you will work them out in American terms.

Let's remember now that our children are all individuals. Each child is unique. There are no two , not even identical twins - no two the same. All our bureaucracies, all our political policies, all our programs, all our materials, have to assume the lowest common denominator of children. But we who work with them know each one is unique. And our art is to match what happens to the individual nature of all our children. We know, too, that when you are young you are not a miniature adult. You don't see the world as adults see it. You have your individual, indeed unique, perspective on that world and your own way of looking at that world, of understanding it and making sense of it.

Too many policies, too many of the materials our children use for learning, in Britain at least - I hope it's not true for you - too many of the policies and the materials and the arrangements are made by those who've never taught young children and who don't fully understand how different young children are - how they understand through their own direct and personal experience. It is experience which is the great teacher. Or at least we who teach are the better teachers if we work within the parameters, within the opportunities, presented by the child's experience. For the child, it is his or her place in experience which matters. The context for learning must always be related to the individual and that individual's experience.

I remember three little girls around nine years old that I met in a school one day. I forget what had taken me to that school. I walked in through the school door and there they were, working side by side on a large collage picture, on fabric. They were painting and stitching and glueing. And the picture they were making, these three nine-year-old girls, was recognizably of Viking ships. The great square sail, high-prowed Viking ships that sailed across from Scandanavia at least as far as Britain, and we understand, as far as you, here, in North America. Well I know a bit about the Vikings, and you can't keep a teacher down you know, so I interfered, which we do so often, don't we? There they were chattering away. I don't know what subject of the curriculum it was. It was certainly history; it was certainly language; it was certainly art and it was craft. It was many things. Of course these were young children. It was an experience through which they were growing and learning. So I bent over and interrupted them and I said, "Who made those ships then?".

You see I was searching for the answer, the Vikings. I would tell them a bit about the Vikings and what a gifted, artistic people they were, and not fighting all the time with these horned helmets and swords, which is what we see so often in the history books.

So I asked my question: "Who made those ships then?"

And the little girl in the middle said, "Well, I'm doing that one and she's doing that one, and she's doing that one."

I was reminded again of the essential nature of what it is to be nine. What matters to you most at that age is what you are doing. Now the girls knew their picture was of Viking ships. It was part of a study they were making. They had been to York to see a reconstructed one and so on. We could get round to the Vikings, but I had to start with where they were in their experience. I smiled to myself. I had been reminded again of the nature of our children. I remembered Froebel's words, "Watch the child. She will show you what to do."

I walked on. I spent an hour or two hours in that school working with the principal. On my way out of the school I had already forgotten the lesson the children had taught me. Because I bent over and I asked another question, I said, "When were those ships made then?".

And they said, "We started them last Wednesday."

Well, we know of the essential nature of our children. And I think you know we have a responsibility indeed a duty to remind our lawmakers, our politicians, our administrators, our researchers, of this, the essential nature of the young and how they learn. They sometimes forget so it is we who spend our days alongside children, sharing in their lives, and helping them grow, (because that is the essential act in which we are engaged) who have to remind them that our young children are not miniature adults, however much they may look it, with lipstick on a ten-year-old and with their slick talk taken from the television. You only have to be away staying with a child for one evening, one night, to see the teddy bear come out on the pillow to understand that inside that sophisticated nine-year-old, that even more sophisticated ten-year-old, there is a very young child indeed, who is thinking in a young child's way and making sense of the world within a context which is understood through personal experience.

We teachers use so many words, do we not? We have this touching faith in the power of words, I expect that's how many of us became teachers. We were the ones at school who were quick with the words. And so we got the grades and we got the college courses, and we now instruct. We now educate. And we use words, words, words, all the time. Yet, experience is the greater teacher of children. So all words both spoken and written have to have a context that the child can understand.

Let me tell you a little story about a boy of ten that I met once - ten years old, fourth-grade, I guess. He was in an RE lesson too. You mustn't get the impression we just teach religious education. It just so happens I have two stories for you this morning and both are concerned with religion. His teacher had told the story of the Prodigal Son. Had told it very well in his own words. And these ten-year-olds who, I'm sure, were very familiar with the story sat on the edge of their chairs and listened, listened intently because this teacher had the gift for storytelling which many teachers of young children have - or work to have. Afterwards, as you would expect in a modern classroom like yours, the children began to do some things for themselves. To write, to go back to the Bible to read the words there, to make a picture, to act a play. It turned into a busy scene which is characteristic of our world of young children. And I moved around, among the children helping them with their work. I came upon one boy, who was writing, and writing very fluently indeed. He probably had a reading age of 14 or 15 - one of those who was quick with words, perhaps he's a teacher now. It is some years since I met him and I have never forgotten him. Out of interest I asked him about some words that his teacher had used - a phrase, a colloquial phrase. The teacher had said, "He came to himself". There was the son - poor, miserable, nothing to eat, desperately hungry, living with the pigs in the pig sty - didn't know what to do. One day he came to himself and said, "I'll go back to my father. Perhaps at least he'll have me as a servant."

So I said to the boy: "What does it mean when you say, 'He came to himself'?"

This boy, like all the others, had sat and listened intently, dare I say even as you are now to me, but I wondered if he'd understood. He thought a minute - this bright boy - and then he said, "He came to himself. I know what it must have meant. It must have meant that he'd finished undressing!" Well, you do, don't you? When you've finished undressing, you come to yourself. Now I've never forgotten that boy. Where did he look for meaning? (And all our days with children are filled with a search for meaning. It is what transforms a skill into a life force). Where did he look for meaning when confronted by one of a hundred, a thousand adult mysteries? Where else would he look at the age of ten but deeply into his own experience? It was a clever answer. Words, yes, they are the very stuff of our work as teachers. But words related to experience, that is our children's world.

Dare I remind us this morning that the natural world of our children is one of curiosity, exploration and a will to learn. I think, perhaps, that a reminder is necessary. Too often the media treatment of education looks on the black side and seems to assume that all children are filled with original sin. Bad news is news. Good news is not news at all. Too often we read

or we hear in speeches only the negative things and so many parents, even we ourselves, are influenced in our attitudes.

Of course there are children - and we meet them from time to time - who are in some measure apathetic about learning, even hostile to the learning we try to bring to them. Let us now at this last session of the conference remind ourselves that that is not the natural world of children. There is ample evidence from research that shows how even from the first hours of birth there is a questing, a searching to interact with the world. Yes, perhaps searching for food initially, but for all sorts of things as children get older. So when sometimes I meet children who would seem to be turning away from learning, from school, I remind myself of my own two daughters, restless on a duty visit to their grandparents, and a wise grandmother saying, "Would they like to go up to the attic?" And they then disappearing for two hours without a word because out of the tea chest they were bringing the things of the 20s and the 30s. They were absorbed! Or the children I saw last summer by a rock pool in Cornwall. Three hours they spent in that rock pool - looking, talking, playing, making, learning, growing. If we find children - I hope we don't but if we do - who are apathetic or hostile, let us not doubt the essential nature of our children. Let us ask, rather, what life has done to those children to make them like that? Perhaps in families, perhaps in schools, perhaps the process of education itself has been too much the offering of ready-made answers. Perhaps those children have been asked to grow in the skills of language by finding the words that are already in the textbook or in the mind of the teacher. It was Piaget who said that we must be careful about ready-made truths which are half-truths. The best school after all for the world of childhood is the school not where children know the most answers, but the school where the children ask the most questions.

Let me remind us all now at this last session that the natural world of the children is also one in which imagination and fantasy are strong. Your experience is like mine and confirmed by research .... our children when they are young spend a lot of their waking hours in their dreams. So did you, when you were young, and you still use, as I do, your dreams as a way of dealing with reality. Is not wasted time. It is the way in which we make sense of our world.

Of all the qualities in our children we seek to help them gain with us as they grow, the use of the imagination must be one of the most important. Indeed our imaginings grow more important with every passing year as our technology develops and becomes even more marvellous. We must remember that every machine that we use, every machine we have ever had and all those to come

in the future have, before anything can be made, first to be imagined by someone.

Sometimes our bureaucrats and our politicians and those who do not spend their days with young children relegate the use of the imagination, essentially the creativity that is within us all, to the sidelines. Something to be done in the afternoon if you've worked at basic skills in the morning! How wrong this is for children for whom creativity and the acquisition of basic skills are inextricably interlocked.

I remember my own school days in London many years ago, sitting at that sloping desk in our rows all facing the teacher. It is different these days. How those desktops would be covered in marks! The desperate marks of children who had to listen, listen, listen and not do things for themselves. I remember how those marks and the knothole in the desktop, the pencil in the slot in the front of the desk were taken into my dreams to become a treasure island or a subway train! That was my world. I looked all right. as I sat there seemingly attentive, but I wasn't truly in the reality of the classroom, the world of the imagination was much more real to me. I shall have to work very hard this morning you know if you are not to go away to your own world of dreams. Perhaps you already have!

Of course there always were one or two words that were calculated to bring you back into the present with a bump. Because out of the blur of sound which was your teacher's lesson, his or her words, you suddenly heard your name. You were being asked a question and of course you didn't know the answer. You didn't even know what the question was! I used to look heavenward for inspiration - it never came.

I wonder, I just wonder if any of you were like that. Do you remember being lost in your dreams and suddenly hands would be going up around you...? The class had been asked a question - a technique we still use of course. No idea what the question was, but hands were going up. Now I don't know about you, but I had a technique for dealing with this that sometimes worked. I used to have a quick look around and try to gauge how difficult a question it was. If only two or three hands were up - and when you were ten, they were always girls' hands, weren't they? - then you could look attentive and interested and maybe escape retribution. But of course, if half the hands were going up, two-thirds of the hands, well, you had to do something more. So I used to put my hand up, about halfway.. no higher, for that would increase the risk of being asked. I used to watch my teacher very hard then. If her eyes turned away from me to the bright child in the corner,

my hand used to grow very strong, but if her eyes swivelled dangerously back towards me, my hand grew weak and fell by my side. It wasn't really up at all.

There were many such days in which one led a secret life in the children's world and was quite separate from school. I did. Many of you did.

Our task today, knowing what we know about young children and their real world and their nature of which I presume to remind us this morning, is to bring school and the real world of the children (which is often not a real world, but a world of dreams) closer together. For the children fact and fantasy are never far apart. I remember a little child who came up to his teacher when I was with her - he was about six-years-old and asked her what I'm sure she considered a somewhat embarrassing question. Out of the blue - it does happen, doesn't it? - he tugged at her skirt and then he said, "Miss, Miss, where did I come from?"

A difficult question. Anyway, the young teacher gave what I thought was a very fine answer. She bobbed down, which is where we usually are to be found, level with the children, and she said, "Where did you come from? Well you see, right at the very beginning, right at the very beginning, you were sort of a seed".

It was enough for him at the age of six. He didn't pursue the matter. But he was interested and he said slightly wonderingly, "A seed was I? Was my picture on the packet?"

Related to this is something that perhaps it's a little unfashionable to discuss in education, but in time will come again. We will not always be looking back. Our children's world is intensely a world of feeling, of the emotions. This is one of the strongest dynamics of all in helping children grow and learn. The children feeling for you and for me as the teacher, feeling for their peers and feeling for their parents, and if we are very good in our profession, feeling for the work in hand because it is a context in which children can begin to deal with ideas through their own direct personal experience.

But feeling it is - and hard to measure. Perhaps therefore slightly suspect in this age of measurement in which we live and work. How dangerous it is, this time of measurement, how dangerous it is ... It can lead to an assumption sometimes unrecognized in ourselves, that what is measurable in education is the most important part of it. A dangerous assumption indeed!

Much of education, much of the growth and the development of children, is not measurable, at least not then when you are by the side of a seven-year-old, when you are by the side of a nine-year-old. Not at that moment. Much remains as it always has remained - an act of faith. That is why we teachers need to be trusted by the communities that we serve. Of course we must deserve that trust and hold ourselves accountable whenever we can. But the community has to accept that life is subtle, and learning is life and learning cannot be reduced to stark black and white, to figures on the page. Rather is life a kaleidoscope full of the infinite shades of every color that we have ever known! It is impossible to measure everything and feeling is the most difficult of all to measure yet it is one of the important aspects of our children's world.

Perhaps there is more than half a danger now that in our technological world we will undervalue the power of feeling. Please don't think I in any way wish to resist the technology. It is we, the educators who in little more than a century have made the technology possible. It is a way of commanding our environment and we must hope that if we educate well then society will use the technology for wise and good ends and so lead to a greater sum of human happiness. This does not always happen now. But in this time of high technology - and more and more developing,year by year, month by month, there is a need to remind ourselves this morning of the power of feeling.

I will let a poet speak for me at this moment. Poets have this gift, have they not, of putting important ideas into a clear context. This poet is also a teacher. His name is Laurence Sale and he calls his writing First Lesson. It is a cautionary tale. I will leave you with it.

I am holding it up like this
so that you all can see it:
you've seen it often I'm sure
in the meadows where you play
or by the road.

And now, watch, as I strip
one by one, the petals:
I'm doing this to show
how even a flower has secrets
and complex workings.

Note the stamen, comprising
filament and anther. Inside
we find the pistil, consisting
of ovaries, stigma and style.
Remember those words.

What is your question? Ah, those
are ovules, fertilized by,
pollen - a brief affair
of bees and falling powder
which does not concern us.

So next time you see a flower
children, don't simply think
how pretty it looks, but try
applying these grown-up words.
And watch it die.

We must not let the flowers die through over-analysis in our classrooms but accept the strength and power of feeling and not let the creativity of our children, their expressiveness, the use of their imagination in any way be separated from their important studies of mathematics, science and literacy. In the children's world, the world of experience, all are one (and not just in the kindergarten!). Certainly through the years of childhood this is one of your first concerns in ACEI, and yes, beyond those years, too.

Our children's world is, of course, a world of their increasing command over the environment. On this last morning let us just stand back from the negative time in which we live and work. It is negative and it is damaging. Too often we test, we assess, we write in order to uncover what is <u>not</u> there. We start by trying to find the deficiencies of children. How destructive that is in the children's world. We are well aware of the effects of human expectations upon our actions. How we all rise or fall to the level of the expectations that surround us and the expectations we have of ourselves. So there is only one way to educate and that is with hope. And there is only one way to teach and that is to look for the signs of success - to celebrate them and then to go on to more success.

This is the greatest danger of the testing industry so strong in America and in Britain now. We tend to use it to find what children cannot do, not to use it to find evidence of their powers, their fast-developing powers. It was Adler who said, so wisely, "If you can't praise a page, praise a line. If you can't praise a line, praise a word. If you can't praise a word, praise the way in which the shape of a letter is made. Praise marks success and success is the beginning of growth".

You will be back with the children tomorrow. There are two ways of looking at your children: one is to see what they cannot do and that hurts them; and the other is to search, even if this is difficult, for what they can do. All of you could bring us evidence of the powers of your children. I have some evidence with me this morning. Because I've read you some adult words, let me read you now the words of a child - a 10-year-old from what might be called by a sociologist, an unpromising, disadvantaged background. But when I met her she was in a good school and she had learned language and all the skills of language by starting with the language which was of her-family grown. Then moving towards the language that we teachers have to teach. She writes about an old man who lives in her family, these are her words, she let me keep them.

> "My grandfather is 89 and he's 90 in April. When he speaks, he stutters. He's always grumbling and moaning and his hands are frail. He looks as white as a ghost. He speaks gruffly. When he sits down he does it slowly. When he is drinking his tea, everytime he's had a drink he smacks his lips and says, 'Ahhh.' He wears brown trousers and an old leather waist coat. His hair is gray and he is thin. In his cupboard he keeps a lot of small boxes. In one box he keeps hapennies, in another, old pennies. He has old fashioned things. He's got a grandfather clock and an old sideboard. He's fallen downstairs once. He talks about our relations but he mostly talks about his neighbors. When he's finished saying a sentence, he always says 'you know?' He's not much of a sport."

She was just 10-years-old when that was written. At first there were mistakes in the spelling and the punctuation was not quite as I read it. But her teacher helped her and so her powers were realised to the point at which the words can bring the old man into this auditorium - thousands of miles from the girl's family. Just through the power of her words. You have a similar power in all your classrooms, in all your schools, if you will but look for it. Praise it. Celebrate it. And your children will be yet more powerful. Remember the feeling in the girl's words. She wrote so well about this old man because of the feeling she had for him - not always pleasurable feeling. How irritating it was when he took so long to sit down because his body was old and stiff unlike her young body. How irritating it was when he smacked his lips and said, "Ahh." yet again. But there was love there and when love and skill come together, then you have a masterpiece.

My time is nearly up but I must say a word about we teachers. I have been saying a lot of words about teachers all along I suppose, but always in relation to the children. If we are there inside the children's world, understanding it, sensitive to how different it is to the adult world - then how do we help our children? Well, in a hundred, a thousand ways. But we

have of course one great asset as we work alongside our children. From the added height of our years and our experience which the children have yet to have we can see further ahead. We can see where the children might go. As adults we are no longer the immediate beings that our children are, seldom looking far back or far forward. We know what might be in the future. Because we know that, we can help the children grow. A word here, a word there, a new material, a word of advice, encouragement, direct instruction, a thousand ways of helping children grow. It is by being there and working within the opportunities, the context, the parameters presented by the children's experience (which we ourselves create at times) that we can help them go further than they ever would by themselves. This is our important task.

These words of Christopher Logue are written about Appolinaire. But like so much poetry, the words have a more universal application. And they very aptly describe many teachers known to me, and I'm sure many teachers like you in this auditorium.

Appolinaire said
"Come to the edge."
"We might fall."
"Come to the edge."
"It is too high."
And they came.
And he pushed them
And they flew.

That is what we do. As teachers we take the children further than they would have gone without us.

I have one last idea about our children's world which if we work well is our world of education. And the more the two are the same the more will our children develop their powers and grow. One last idea. One that I believe to be of supreme importance. In 1987, in the western world, of course we are ambitious for more success. We are never satisfied. This is why there is such an insistence on testing, on looking for what is not there, on identifying failure. This is why there is so much anxiety among parents and teachers. Our children only have it once around with us and we have to get them ready for when they will function as autonomous adults so we have got to hurry. That's a good deal of being in school. But at the moment it is too much of being in school, because it is not the natural world of the children. The children's world is of today and it is the quality of their experiences today which enables them to prepare for the future. Too much pressure (perhaps only

now, after several days away from the heat and burden of your professional work can you savour this) - too much pressure - on, on, more, more, can turn your classroom and your school into something like a long hallway, a corridor. Get the children in early! Push them hard! Hurry them on! Get the test scores! And if you are very quick and good at learning - out of our school earlier than the others! You can be accelerated! That could be an idea strongly in our hearts or minds, without our acknowledging it.

But pause now and take stock. We are spending time with our children and it is a time that's called childhood. It is in the proud name of your organization to which I belong.

Childhood - the time of being a child. It is not only a time of getting ready for some future life at the end of the corridor marked marriage or college or a job if you are lucky. It is not only that. The years of childhood are never to be repeated years. So, when you leave your school, your classroom, at the end of the day - as a professional teacher of course it is right to ask yourself, "What did my children, what did that child, or that one - learn for tomorrow?" Yes - that is part of our work. But ask yourself another question which is of equal importance, <u>equal importance</u>. Ask yourself whether today, with me the teacher, was good enough to be part of someone's life. If it was, then the marvelous thing is that your children probably prepared best of all for tommorrow. Too much pressure too much hurrying does not lead you quickly to the end you desire. Rather should your classroom be a room richly hung, full of challenge and excitement. Full of experience, full of warmth and feeling which can sustain from time to time the inevitable failure and frustration of growing up. A place of <u>now</u>. A place that recognizes the best way to learn is to live.

Ask yourself that question when you leave your school tomorrow. Not only what did my children learn for the future, but was today good enough to be part of someone's life.

This is what it can be like. Again, the poet was not writing about education but about a dream of happiness. But I know, many, many schools in my country and although my experience is more limited in America, I know schools here too, where these words are a perfect evocation of what life is like in that richly hung room. And these words remain - what might be, if we will it.

John Tessimond wrote:

One day people will touch and talk perhaps easily,
And loving be natural as breathing and warm as
sunlight,
And people will untie themselves, as string is unknotted,
Unfold & yawn & stretch & spread their fingers,
Unfurl, uncurl like seaweed returning to the sea,
And work will be simple and swift as a seagull flying,
And play will be as casual and quiet as a seagull
settling,
And the clocks will stop, and noone will wonder or care
or notice,
And people will smile without reason, even in the winter,
even in the rain.

I know many schools like that. Our task is to make yet more. I wish you well.